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ABSTRACT

An innovative program developed and implemented at Montclair State College in New Jersey was designed to maximize students' writing potential within the framework of course requirements across the curriculum. Based on the assumption that the written expression of ideas and the critical thinking skills associated with writing are fundamental to all disciplines, this program focused on encouraging students to become competent in writing clear, coherent prose by giving them the option to write papers for publication in lieu of writing term papers. In orienting students to this approach, instructors reviewed the mental processes on which written expressions of ideas depend: generalizations, inferences, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Students were also told that they needed to develop the capacity to apply prior knowledge to new contexts; draw their own conclusions; state a thesis clearly and support it; organize the parts of a paper; and adapt their writing to the intended audience. Students who elected to write for publication were instructed to write essays, and to select a journal they felt comfortable with and use its editorial requirements for style and organization. Student papers have been published in a number of professional journals, and their evaluations of the program at semester's end indicated that it had resulted in a worthwhile learning experience and (unexpectedly) a new-found respect for published articles. (DJR)

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A Non-Traditional Approach for Improving the Writing Skills of College Students

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Improving Student Learning Outcomes: Nurturing Product Quality Through Student Writing for Publication.

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In the current climate of declining student enrollments, shrinking educational resources, and the futuristic rush to embrace high technology, which is reshaping society, colleges and universities are facing a host of new challenges in the post-industrial era.

In a manner of speaking, the future is in the educated minds of today's students, and how well institutions of higher learning heed the call for curricular reform with innovative, timely and promising programs having tangible educational outcomes will these measures affirm the symbiosis between academia and the social, political, and economic system.

One simple, but irrefutable fact is we live in a world of change, and in this context, must plan and act on the basis of change--change that is on-going, constant, and unpredictable; change that is both cyclical and structural, fluctuating in size, direction, or in rate of development.

The point is, that given this scenario, if America's institutions of higher learning are to survive and remain viable in the next century, they will need to re-evaluate their mission statement, and curricula, because educational planning must reflect an abiding concern for supply and demand in current and future work requirements. Curricula reflecting strategic planning of this nature represents the best defense against the fickleness of change in a transforming society.

Maximizing Instructional Resources

From a pedagogical perspective, meeting demands of students in an evolving society, in terms of instructional quality and product quality will be with some difficulty, given budgetary constraints and academic pressures on faculty. But these are challenges common to higher education throughout its history and even more so in recent times.

In any event, our task, like change, which is on-going and constant, is to create a ripple of influence that will be felt in the lives of students years after graduation.

The bottom line, of course, is the degree to which teaching-learning outcomes have tangible results, are responsive to the goals, capabilities, background and priorities of each student, and to the skills required for an economy shifting away from the old "smoke-stack" industries, and toward service and "information-based" industries.

But, we should be reminded that the historic purpose of higher education is the obligation to provide opportunities for global and unitary experiences out of which emerges the truly educated person who is comfortable in his/her existence, who understands (at least to a reasonable degree) the physical world, the social environment, and the moral forces that shape and influence us all in a complete way; and who has the skills to evaluate the meaning of his/her world, even to the extent of visualizing how existing conditions can be improved for the better.

As these possibilities illustrate, the truly educated person is cognitively organized to use knowledge already possessed, and use that knowledge, in conjunction with new knowledge, to generalize, draw comparisons, sort out logical fallacies in arguments, and formulate reasoned positions on social or ethical issues, thus facing the future with confidence and excitement.

Prologue

This paper is a descriptive report on the author's efforts in mediating some of the issues/needs addressed herein. The "Project" entailed student writing for publication. The pedagogical focus was to encourage students to identify alternatives to the traditional term paper or, to be more specific, teacher-sponsored topic writing assignments, and to offer support while students act on what we perceive to be a unique growth-promoting opportunity.

We tried (although we are not certain, we always succeeded) to focus student attention on their life/professional experiences, and the organization of thought behavior and ideas as coherent themes. We sought to foster in students analysis of their own thinking for understanding and appreciating creative processes of reasoning for examining those values and principles important to the quality of life.

Three basic ideas guided our efforts. First, and foremost, the idea that the student is motivated to learn. Second, learning is viewed comprehensively, since understanding and the integration of new information into one's beliefs system is inclusive.

Third, learning experiences are oriented towards both cognitive and affective learning needs. Such an orientation enhances the relevancy of the learning and serves to develop the learner in a wholistic manner.

The project had its genesis with acceptance of the notion that faculty must change the way it approaches the learning process. In considering what and where to change, we looked at our years of experience with teacher-sponsored topic writing assignments, and the intended learning results. We concluded, product quality of traditional term papers to be less than satisfactory.

Whether tne explanation for unsatisfactory quality can be attributed to student perceptions of teacher-mandated writing assignments as "busy work," intellectually unredeeming or institutional requirements long bereft of purpose is difficult to assess, in the absence of systematic study. This fact not withstanding, we concluded that improving the product quality of written work was an essential educational priority.

Because the written expression of ideas and the critical thinking skills associated with writing are fundamental to all disciplines, every student should be competent in writing clear, coherent prose. And since an information society demands proficiency in writing, encouraging student writing for publication was like breathing fresh life into the teaching process generating, we believe, a revitalized quest for learning.

The bottom line was not so much the facilitation of conditions for stimulating educational renewal, as was our focus on encouraging student writings for publication, within the framework of course requirements. Admittedly, this approach was an implicit criticism of traditional teacher-mandated term papers, a form of learning activity, some researchers would describe as passive learning with questionable learning outcomes.

The educational goals were simple and straightforward. We sought to promote intellectual abilities by setting high expectations in performance. These were not in our estimation unrealistic expectations, but expectations slightly above the students' current abilities. We were convinced that people tend to live up to the demands placed on them. And finally, the approach was thought-focused because we deemed it essential that students, across the disciplines, develop the thinking and writing skills essential for dealing with the complex and challenging problems in their future work situation.

The importance of writing competency cannot be overstated. Studies have shown that individuals with writing skills are often the best students and the most successful professionals. Sadly, most people have no idea that their lack of writing proficiency is holding them back.

In order to accomplish our task, we needed a rationale enabling students to perceive rewards from self-directed cognitive experiences that they could value, and integrate into their future occupational skills. This level of performance we believed would trigger internal motivation for increased learning across the curriculum.

We found a rationale in the fusing of career and academic training. We rationalized that the prerequisite cognitive capacity for developing Writing Skills could be achieved if we linked such efforts to the idea that 1) contributing to the literature from which one has received his/her academic training is a professional obligation and responsibility, and 2) since every academically trained person should at some point in their career have something important to report evolving from their professional/occupational experiences, cultivation of this attitude and the development of writing skills should be a teaching goal in graduate school.

Lack of Writing Skills Impacts on Discipline

Whatever field of endeavor students are preparing for--commerce or industry, science or the arts, philosophy or education or government and statemanship, investment of resources in fostering writing skills, exposing them to the challenging business of doing scholarly work, and promoting critical reasoning skills constitutes the highest priority task, as we prepare for the 21st century, only 14 years away.

Such a commitment is the only or at least the best way to pass on scholarly traditions, promote creativity, and guarantee not just professional development but the very future of the discipline.

In our judgment, this is the most fundamental intellectual legacy we can give to our students.

For indeed, no discipline, be it medicine, law or accounting, can hope to retain its stature, prestige and credibility, in the absence of insightful and timely information that keeps close to the realities of the field.

If students are deficient in writing skills, they will be singularly handicapped in discharging their indebtedness and obligation to their discipline.

It has been said many times that we use but a small percentage of our potential. Less than 25%. I am reminded of William James who said that human beings live too far within self-imposed limits.

Our project was designed to help students use that untapped 75% so that they can discover and fulfill their potentials.

Writing For Publication as an Option

The program was successful, in part, because it was made clear to the students that writing papers for publication was an option. We frankly acknowledged wih no disrespect to the class the realization that probably most of them lack the requisite skills for publication. We insisted, however, they were capable of writing good, short and simple declarative sentences expressing an idea. And it was this potential that was to be exploited with creative and imaginative thinking. Originality was stressed as a demonstration of the individual's capacity to think through ideas and conceptualize them in a meaningful frame of reference. In orienting the students to the assignment, they were cautioned, serious writing is always preceded by a search of the extant literature to discover if what one has to say is truly a contribution to the literature. Since the object of written work is

to inform, we stress students should know what others before them have said about the same subject. To ignore past contributions, we admonished, is to impair the scholarship of their efforts. Lesson-wise, the students were told when a person says, "I know what I mean, but can't express it," the individual most likely does not know what he/she means. The individual still has some thinking to do. As the individual begins to pull his/her thoughts together, especially by learning to write in short, simple declarative sentences, the person will clarify his/her own ideas and for some individuals, this is an excellent method for developing understanding of subject organization.

We made clear in the orientation, which was usually the initial class meeting, our strong belief that the acquisition of attitudes and understanding of the importance of writing proficiency cannot be left to chance. We further believed that in the future employment, their written work will be judged primarily on its contents, that is, on the value or quality of the information and ideas it expresses; that careful organization and clear, concise expression of content would be essential if the intended reader is to grasp the full meaning. Thus, the mental processes on which written expressions of ideas depend were reviewed. These included: 1) Generalizations: pulling together the common elements that relate specific examples, ideas or instances to one another; 2) Inferences: extracting the meanings that are implied but not stated explicitly; reading between the lines; 3) Analysis: examining parts of the whole, such as causes, effects and processes; 4) Synthesis: developing ideas into new relationships or contexts: creating, organizing the parts as in a puzzle; 5) Evaluation: making judgments according to a criterion: is it concise, readable, organized. Our message to students emphasized that in order to be marketable and successful in today's world, they will need to experience, if only from a market-centered perspective, the rigors of serious writing. This means: 1) developing the capacity to apply to new context the

knowledge gained from classroom learning, readings, life experiences and library research; 2) developing the ability to draw conclusions, as opposed to simply restating or summarizing the works of others; 3) being able to state a thesis clearly and support same with reasoning and evidence; 4) being able to organize the parts of a paper in an orderly sequence, governed by a controlling purpose that is clear to the writer, with paragraphs and subsections containing their own internal organization; and 5) being able to adapt what one writes to the needs and expectations of the intended audience, whether it is one's peers, other scholars in one's discipline, or the general public.

Angle of Approach

At the outset, we recognized students will have various needs and abilities regarding this assignments: 1) those students who have the ability to write competently but who might need encouragement to write for publication; 2) those students who lack the intrinsic drive and self-confidence and might therefore require some market-force persuasion, reassurance and ego support; and 3) those students who for a variety of reasons would opt for the traditional term paper requirement. We were convinced, therefore, that students would need to be inspired, challenged or nudged into writing a mature and publishable paper with all the confidence that makes it possible. As an aside, I would point out that published papers as learning outcomes are significant indices of teaching effectiveness. This was an explicit goal.

With respect to students' probable reaction, we anticipated initial resistance if not outright dismissal of the challenge to compose articles for professional journals. Our strategy in minimizing or disarming their arguments took the following approach, which proved to be effective.

1. Students were initially oriented on their soon-to-be professional status with all the "rights, privileges and immunities thereunto appertaining,"

including the obligation we argued in contributing to the literature of their respective discipline. It was made clear that this is a responsibility all members of a profession assume: that only as the existing body of knowledge undergoes constant review and revision, as new ideas and experience emerge from practice, can the discipline maintain its usefulness, relevancy and credibility.

2. The advantages and benefits of serious writing were discussed in great detail. We noted, for example, the immense pride in seeing one's paper published in important journals alongside those of well-known scholars; the prestige and status accruing therefrom; its value factor in enhancing one's resume; the demonstration of one's ability to pursue doctoral studies. (Several of my writer-students have gone on to earn doctorates.) Lastly, we stressed the equally serious commitment to writing as a significant mesure or component of professional leadership. Publication of one's views, we observed, demonstrates ability to articulate issues, which is an important index of leadership.

3. For the timid, unsure student, our strategy involved encouraging them to "test the waters" by writing an "op-ed" piece, a short newspaper article or letter to the editor of their local newspaper or to a news journal (e.g., Time, Newsweek, U.S News and World Report) in response to a news article. This approach had a two-fold purpose: 1) as a result of their "article," the student should feel more self-confidence, more comfortable with the ensuing demands of a larger, more complex paper, and better able to cope with the rigors of serious writing; and 2) the student would be encouraged to use the published statement as the basis for a more developed paper with the usual references, footnotes and bibliography. It should be noted, several students have found this prescription helpful as a starter, perhaps, because it enabled them to sharpen their understanding of short, concise articles that communicate ideas. As a tool it was most effective.

4. Since lectures are the predominant method of instruction, and it is generally recognized that the educational yield from lectures is generally low, we sought to increase the yield by granting students a wide latitude in topic selection, including topics indirectly related to course content. Factors such as students' age, maturity, years of experience, discipline (my students represent a variety of fields, e.g., teaching, health profession, business and social welfare) and topic interest had to be considered, giving the heterogeneous makeup of the class and the unusual requirements imposed on them. In general, we sought to strike a dynamically important note of inquisitiveness by calling to students' attention (especially those with years of professional experience) the yet unsolved problems and issues in their field and encourage them to re-examine the fundamental tenets of his/her discipline.

In this connection, the clinical value of this approach was that it made more palpable our assertion that as professionals already toiling in the "vineyards," there is much they can harvest in conceptual and theoretical questions culled from "hands-on" experiences. This strategy also helped to facilitate the breakdown of powerful anxieties and/or frozen attitudes. More importantly, it helped to persuade those students wavering in their choice between a term paper or a more substantial paper for publication. As a further inducement and source of support, we establish a working relationship with the college workshop, a remedial program sponsored by the English Department for assisting students with their writing problems.

Essay-Type Articles Stressed

The students were instructed to write essays and not research-focused papers, the requirements of which we considered too time-consuming and perhaps outside the individual's level of experience. They were advised to examine the college library's holding of journals and periodicals and select a journal they felt comfortable with for submission of their manuscript. They were further instructed to comply with the

journal's editorial requirement and not to follow the traditional term paper organization and style. We discussed protocol for submitting manuscripts, and the writer using his experience as a consulting editor to a journal, the juried/review process was explained as was the appropriate information for the cover letter. They were also forewarned of possible rejection and the psychological let-down ensuing therefrom. We spoke at great length assuring the class that the best of authors have experienced editorial rejection, and the writer candidly shared with them his experiences at failure. At the same time, we reminded the students that a rejection was not per se a failure but a lesson in writing, since it is a common practice for the editor to offer some comments or reasons for the rejection. In some instances, we reminded the class, rewriting the paper with the editor's comments or suggestions in mind, and resubmitting it can often result in its acceptance.

Finally, the class was assured their paper would be graded on the same basis as a term paper. This statement was important lest those students opting for the traditional term paper perceive themselves in a disadvantaged position at grade time.

As an aside, whenever a student sought independent study, we found this an excellent opportunity to tout serious writing. While the student is allowed to fashion his/her own course of study, invariably we would convince the student that a paper of publishable quality should be an outcome of independent study.

Conclusion and Summary

The effort to raise graduate students' writing to the level of competency was in large part attributable to student motivation to learn. We simply created on environment that allowed self-directed learning to occur. Students were giving the primary responsibility for setting learning goals and selecting their learning experiences.

The resulting choice of the students has clearly the character of professionalism as the evidential material suggests. Student papers have been published in such diverse journals as Adult Leadership, NAD Broadcaster, Journal of International Association of Pupil Personnel Worker, Today's Education, The Clearing House, Counseling and Values, The Guidance Clinic, EAP Digest, Cimmaron Review, The Independent School Bulletin, Adult Education, Teacher Paper, N.J. School Board Notes, School Leader, NJEA Review, Journal of Business, Journal of Health Education, and Tempo (Journal of the New Jersey Music Educators Association).

It should be apparent from the above the correctness of the decision to permit a wide latitude in subject choice. Student evaluations at semester's end indicated a worthwnile educational experience. One unanticipated but welcome outcome was students' new-found respect for published articles. Not only had these students learned to write proficiently, and in the process raise their self-confidence, but they also learned that to write is learning to think. And, perhaps, the most striking instance of success was the affirmation of students to continue writing for publication in other classes in lieu of traditional term papers. This was true even for those students whose papers were not accepted for publication. This unique teaching approach has the potential for a new model in student learning outcomes. As the results demonstrate, student publications, as a measure of cognitive learning experiences, are an attractive alternative to the traditional teacher-assigned term paper. One further thought needs to be shared. Obviously, a number of factors contributed to the success of the program. One that stands out is the following. Students find credibility in the writer's efforts, when they know that he has published. As a strategy, I would distribute copies of my articles as well as those

published by former students. Each year, I would try to publish one or two articles so that my efforts would represent for students a model, a standard of sorts for much needed encouragement and support. Thus the students recognize I would not demand from them what I am not prepared to demand of myself. I am certain this has been an important factor in my success to date.